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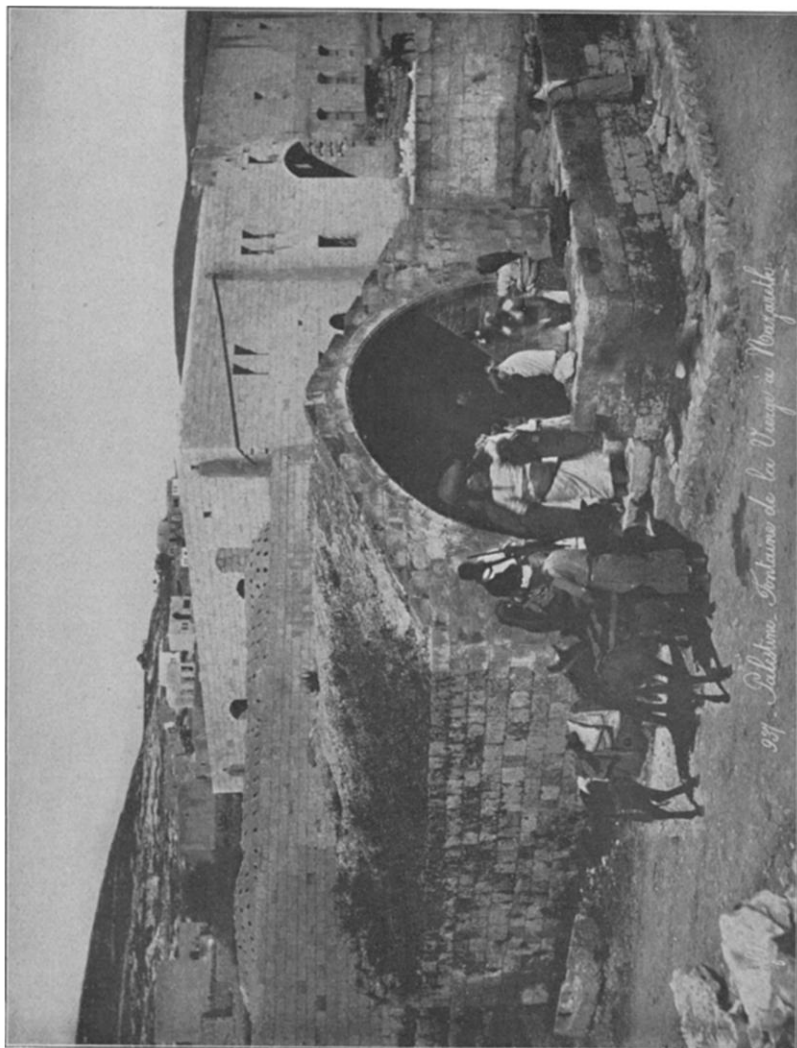
THE BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS.

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The earliest and the latest scenes in Jesus' life attract the Christian—the earliest especially.—The house in Nazareth—the Annunciation and visit to Elizabeth—the effect on Joseph.—The Birth at Bethlehem—the shepherds' watch—the angels' song—the visit to the cave of the Nativity.—The presentation at the Temple—the testimony of Simeon and Anna—the adoration of the Magi.—The flight to Egypt—the return to Nazareth.

THE Christian Church has instinctively seized on the two ends of the earthly life of Jesus, and made them emphatic by fixing on them as the periods of the festivals and celebrations of its calendar. Christian Art also expressing, no doubt, the same instinctive feeling has expended an apparently disproportionate amount of idealizing energy on the beginning and end of the terrestrial career of the Saviour of men. Almost altogether ignoring the years of the active ministry the great artists have multiplied without number their beautiful representations of the Nativity, the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. What do these facts mean? It cannot certainly be a mere accident that the hearts and minds of Christians have fondly reverted to these scenes of the Redeemer's life. We reiterate only an old and easily perceptible truth, and yet a profound one when we give answer to the above question by calling attention to the fact that the birth and death of Jesus Christ stand for the great revealed truths of the Incarnation and the Atonement. There is a hunger and thirst in the human spirit which only the revelation of the fact that "the Word was made flesh" can satisfy. There is a craving in human nature which only the knowledge of the fact that Christ "bare our sins in his own body on the tree," can allay.

But of the two periods of the Lord's earthly life above mentioned the earliest is perhaps the one which is more eagerly



FOUNTAIN AT NAZARETH.

The Traditional Place of the Annunciation.

scanned. How often the desire has been expressed that the annalists had given us more fully the details concerning that wonderful birth and that unique childhood. Even the year of the Saviour's appearance in human weakness has been the subject of many searching investigations and divergent conclusions; and as to the time of the year the very opposite seasons have been pointed out as the most likely period for the event. And yet, have not the evangelists furnished enough facts to gratify every legitimate need and desire? If the data be taken in the simplicity with which they appear to be given, and if no difficulties be created where difficulties do not naturally exist in the narratives, they will present in a few clear pictures a complete story of the Advent and Infancy of Immanuel.

The first scene carries us into Galilee, and particularly to the town of Nazareth, despised for its lack of historical associations, and perhaps for the plainness and crudity of its inhabitants. Here lived a descendant of David in lowly circumstances—Joseph, the carpenter. Here dwelt also another descendant of David in somewhat better circumstances, perhaps; for a priest found his wife among her kin. This was Mary, the betrothed of Joseph. It was the age of expectation. Even far away among the Magians of Mesopotamia the hope that a great King and Deliverer was to make his appearance was vividly entertained. In Palestine this expectation was at its keenest. As when the sun after the winter season gathers strength and pours his warming rays on different fields and simultaneously sets the forces of life to working in them and causes it to spring forth and blossom in apparently independent centers, so the Spirit of the Almighty was evidently at work both far and near vivifying the hope of a marvelous manifestation of Himself. But God is consistent with himself, and having aroused this hope he also vouchsafed certain signs whereby its fulfilment should be certified to all men, especially those in whom the hope was aroused at the time, Thus a series of what men conveniently call "supernatural" occurrences took place to arrest the attention and attest God's special presence in what was about to be witnessed.

The first in importance of these supernatural manifestations

was given to the Virgin that was to become the mother of the Messiah. The thrill which filled her heart as she heard the message of the angel of the Annunciation was only deepened and changed into a gladsome acceptance of a great honor divinely conferred when she was further informed in detailed representation of the nature of her offspring that was to be and of his birth and name. Nor was she, the angel assured her, the first person to receive a supernatural intimation of the impending advent of the Messiah, even though she should have the honor of standing in the closest natural relation to him. Her cousin Elizabeth had already been charged and enabled by the power of God to take upon herself the welcome task of motherhood to the prophet that should go before the face of God's anointed. Eager for every ray of light on such a vital matter, Mary hastened to Judea and there heard even more than was sufficient to confirm the angel's words.

But though the message, thus supernaturally given and supernaturally confirmed, rendered her willing, yea, glad, to assume a position otherwise full of difficulty—a position that apart from these supernatural assurances she would naturally have shrunk from—it created a crisis in her relations to Joseph, her betrothed. On returning from a visit to her cousin in Judea she evidently made known her God-assigned task to the righteous carpenter of Nazareth; and in his mind the information could, under the circumstances, lead to but one resolution, *i. e.*, that of putting her away. But here again God's plan was different from that of men. Joseph was apprised in a vision of the night that the Child of his Virgin wife was to be the Saviour of Israel. His mind was revolutionized. Instead of carrying out his purpose of putting away his intended wife, he now hastens to consummate that perfect union between himself and her that should give him the legal right to shield and protect both her and her offspring from all evil that might threaten. Thus the months passed.

A census was ordered, and, according to the Jewish law, it must be taken according to the tribes and families of the nation. Joseph, as "of the house of David," must go to Bethlehem, "the city of David," to be registered. Nothing was more natural than

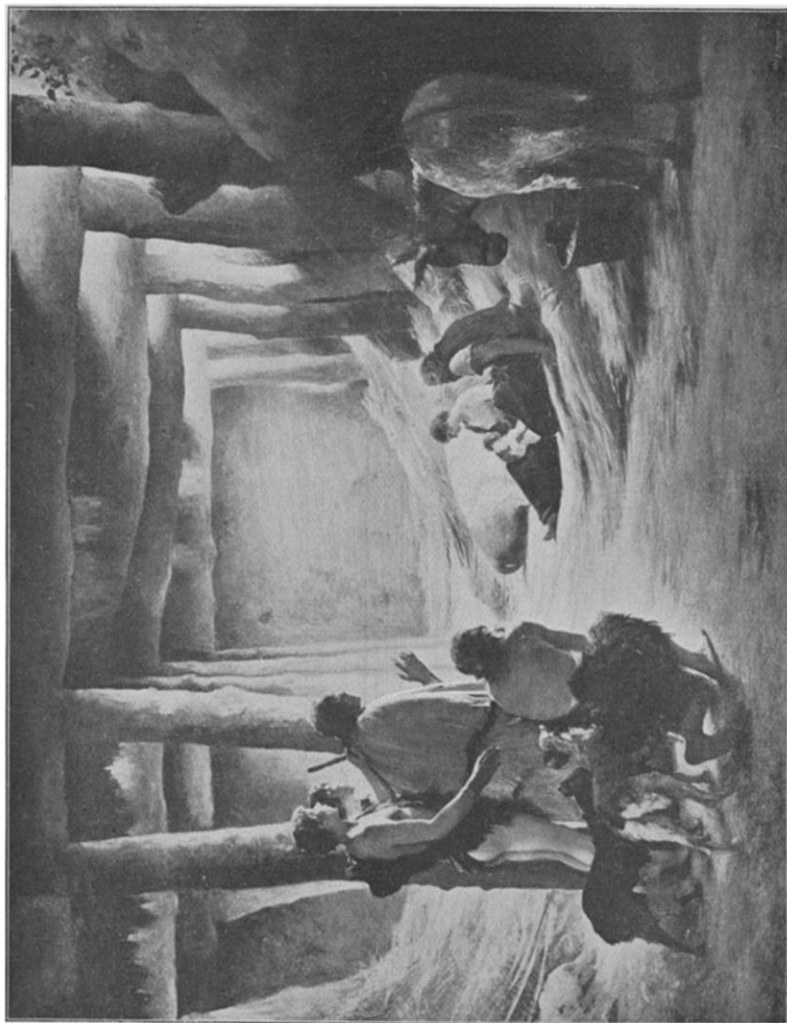
that he should take with him his bride, and thus secure the enrollment also of her son as the true "son of David." The scanty accommodations of the village were soon exhausted under the strain put on them by the extraordinary inflow of men who, like Joseph, had come to be numbered with their "house." The pair from Nazareth were compelled to take their abode in a natural cave outside the village that had been used as a stable



BETHLEHEM FROM THE LATIN CONVENT

for the lodging of cattle. Thus did the Divine Providence bring it about that the King of Israel, "the King of kings and Lord of lords" should enter the world in the lowliest imaginable surroundings. Artists have idealized the historical situation, but only that they might the better express the devout feelings roused by the contemplation of the marvelous facts. The process of idealizing adds nothing either to the charm or the suggestiveness of the bare historical picture. The simplicity of nature and history is the simplicity of God's way of dealing, and needs no embellishment.

And yet lowly and simple as the scene presented at Bethle-



THE ARRIVAL OF THE SHEPHERDS.
—LE ROLLE.

hem it lacked nothing of appropriate accompaniment of miracle. In the inimitable language of St. Luke, "there were shepherds in the same country abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them:" and to their minds, filled with natural awe, the message must have sounded like the reassuring words of a friend come to the rescue in time of peril: "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." And before they could altogether realize the further details of description through which the angelic message should be verified by them in the manger at the cave, the veil between heaven and earth seemed to be lifted, and upon their entranced ears there fell strains of music such as no mortal had heard till then. Yea, and many have been the efforts since to reproduce that celestial harmony. And though none have succeeded in doing this, yet the attempt has proved a source of inspiration and an uplifting force for the whole art of song. Devout Handels and Bachs and Gounods, as well as Mendelssohns and Wagners who would not bow the knee to the Babe of Bethlehem, have soared higher and sung more thrillingly because the heavenly host on that Christmas night, under the clear sky of Syria, praised God and said: "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

But the heavenly vision having accomplished its object, having rendered the first announcement of Christ's birth, a glad one to the humble herdsmen of Judea, was lost to their bodily eyes. The incident, however, moved them to hasten to Bethlehem, and, guided by the light which hung over the entrance of the village inn, they found the cave used as a stable attachment to the inn, and there, although not perhaps in harmony with their ideas of the fitting dignity and splendor in which the Messiah should come, they found what they had been told. Thus assured that they had not been the victims of a natural illusion they in turn related their own experiences of the heavenly music and the angelic message and went back to their humble tasks with glad-

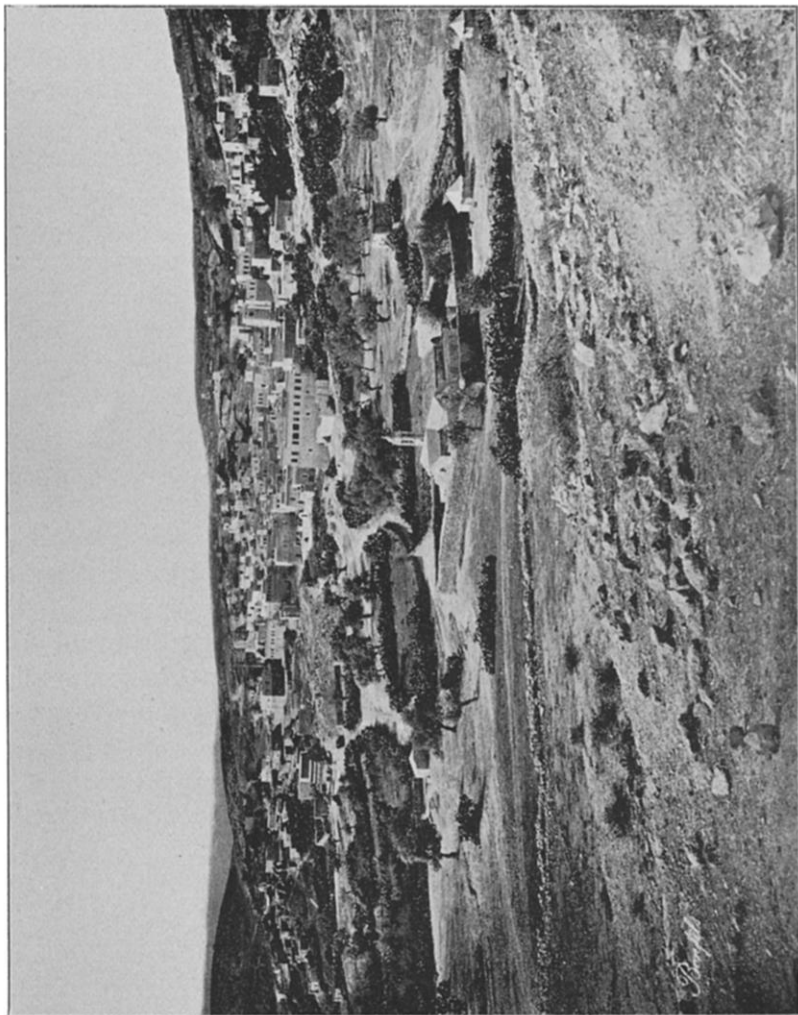
der hearts, leaving those who heard their story in a state of greater wonderment and keener expectation.

The next scene portrayed by the evangelist carries us into the Temple. The law required in the case of a first born male child, first the admission of the child into the body politic by the administration of the rite of circumcision. This was duly performed on the eighth day, and the child received the significant name designated by the angel of the Annunciation to both the parents. The further requirements of the law were the ceremony of the redemption of the first born, and the purification of the mother. Though there might be a possible difference of ten days in the dates of these two events, yet if convenience called for it the ceremony of redemption might be put off and the two services rendered at the same time, *i. e.*, on the forty-first day after the birth of the child. On this day, therefore, Joseph and Mary appeared at the Temple with the offering prescribed for the poor on such occasions, "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons." But scarcely had this service been performed, signifying once more the human and lowly condition of the Infant Christ, before it was counterbalanced by a new testimony to his divine origin and mission. Simeon, a devout man and just, and "waiting for the consolation of Israel," came by the Spirit into the Temple" as this legal ceremony was being ended, and taking the Infant in his arms, poured forth that noble song of praise and gratitude which has remained a religious classic to all the generations following, that song which was also a prophecy of the Child's world-wide mission and of the mother's heart-wound consequent on his earthly suffering. And as if woman also should not be unheard at this first testimony to the Messiah, Anna, "a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser, of a great age, who had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity, and was a widow of fourscore years and four, which departed not from the Temple, but served God with fasting and prayers night and day," steps forth from her otherwise unknown career, and adds her voice to that of Simeon in the recognition of the Messianic character and mission of the Child.

These utterances contributed towards the confirmation if not

indeed towards the formation of the resolve by Joseph that he would not return to despised Nazareth but take his abode at Bethlehem and ply his trade there with a view to associating the "Son of David" with his ancestral history and mission in the "City of David." But this was a resolution which he was not destined to carry out. A danger arose presently from an unexpected quarter. Certain Magi, in whose bosoms the great hope of the age had found lodgment, were led either by a direct supernatural sign in the skies designed especially to inform them that their hope was realized, or by a natural phenomenon interpreted by them under supernatural guidance as the sign of the advent of the Deliverer they expected, made their appearance in the capital of Judea; they went to the very palace of Herod publicly declaring their desire to find the new-born king. But that crafty and unscrupulous usurper, moved to suspicion and dread by the least hint of opposition or rivalry, immediately determined to use these "wise men" in putting out of the way the object of their search. To this end he helped them through the learned scribes to find the approximate place of the new king's birth and depended on their further investigations for the exact details that should lead him to strike the fatal blow at his rival. This then was the danger, and how serious it was no one can fail to realize who has learned of the unnumbered atrocities committed by the bloodthirsty monarch even on his nearest kin. A two-fold warning was given to shield the infant Jesus from the murderous design of the tyrant. The Magi were directed, after their act of homage, to depart without again communicating with Herod. And more effectively still the warning was given to Joseph to flee out of the land altogether.

Thus the holy family, crossing the boundary between Palestine and Egypt, passed out of the jurisdiction of Herod. In vain this bloodthirsty tyrant, true to his nature, ordered the infamous massacre of the innocents; the Holy Child was safe in the arms of a Providence whose purposes are never defeated. Herod's days of blood and hatred were, however, nearing their end at the time. He probably did not survive the murder of the infants of Bethlehem by many weeks. When the news of



NAZARETH.

his death reached the ears of Joseph, he naturally determined to return from his temporary exile. He had not, perhaps, heard, when he started on his homeward journey, of the disposition made by the Roman emperor regarding the government of Palestine. If he had any hopes of again settling down in Judea with Mary and Jesus, he was led to abandon them as he learned that Archelaus was assigned the rule of this division of Palestine. The ruler had signalized his accession to power by deeds of cruelty that portended ill for the land as well as for any Messianic plans in behalf of Jesus. Thus Providence by closing up Judea as a place of residence to him seemed to compel his going back to Nazareth in spite of its proverbially bad reputation.

With the arrival of the holy family at Nazareth the period of the childhood of Jesus closes. In a single verse the inspired narrative gives all that could possibly bear on this portion of the earthly career of the Saviour. "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him." The early generations of Christians, ignoring the distinction between the life of the Saviour of the world and the life of Jesus of Nazareth, vainly sought to fill the apparent gap in the gospels. In the search for the information that was to complete the supernatural life they conjured those fantastic and in many cases absurd and repulsive traditions of the infancy which are woven together into the mythical accounts of the apocryphal gospels. Let it suffice to know that the childhood of Jesus in Nazareth was that of an ideal child in a quiet godly home presided over by an upright man and directed by a tender and pure woman.